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ABSTRACT

The helping professions must aid parents in understanding their children and in providing parents with methods to improve family relationships. Adlerian counseling is presented as one potentially useful method of reaching this goal. The basic principles and democratic philosophy of Adlerian counseling are outlined, and emphasis is placed on the educational aspects of the approach. A case history is also included to exemplify various Adlerian techniques of dealing with typical childhood problems of misbehavior and academic failure. If we are beneficially to affect children's home environments on a large scale, we must share useful counseling skills with parents themselves. (Author/LAA)

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ADLERIAN COUNSELING FOR PARENT EDUCATION*

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The helping professions have traditionally treated useful counseling skills as if they were secrets to be closely guarded. Certain "experts" have never even attempted to share their skills with parents. Parents have the most contact with children, and therefore potentially have the most influence on their lives. If professionals hope to make an impact on children, the home environment must not be ignored. Parents must be helped to understand their children, and be given the tools to develop better family relationships.

Adlerian counseling may be one method of reaching this goal. Alfred Adler established 30 Centers for Guidance of Parents in Vienna as early as the 1920's. Adler realized that since the child functions within a social environment, it is often more expeditious and effective to work directly with those with whom the child has direct contact. The Adlerian counselor helps parents and other significant others to understand the purposes

behind the child's behavior in order to encourage each child's healthy learning and living. Understanding the child's purposes or goals is seen as much more important than uncovering specific external causes of behavior.

In order to understand these goals, Adlerian therapy emphasizes the analysis and interpretation of information regarding the family. Of particular interest to Adlerians is the family constellation of the child, ordinal and psychological position of the child among his siblings, and the child's interpretation of various family dynamics.

Adlerian counseling is essentially an educational approach. After important information is gathered regarding unique family dynamics, the counselor attempts to help the parents understand the child's goals and the effects of the parents' interactions on their child. The child's life style and mistaken notions are explained to the parents in terms they can understand. The counselor then makes suggestions to the parents for helping the child and improving family relationships.

The key to the counselor understanding the child comes through

examining the child's life style. The life style is the child's subjective pattern of life - his evaluation of himself and others. The counselor can understand much about a child's behavior by understanding how a child sees the world and how he fits into it. How the child behaves is understood in terms of his attempt to cope with life as he sees it.

A case history may help us understand a child's lifestyle, and how a child may develop mistaken notions regarding his place in the family.

Jimmy Spencer, age 10, is a concern to his parents because of his disruptive behavior at home and at school. He often gets into fights with his twelve year old brother, Dave. This causes turmoil for the whole family, because it is not always easy fo Mr. and Mrs. Spencer to determine who is to blame and what the punishment should be. Jimmy is doing poorly in school, even though Mrs. Spencer makes him do his homework every night. Although Mrs. Spencer has stated that she will pay each boy a dollar for every "A" they make, Dave, who does well in school, is the only one that seems to respond to the reward. Jimmy says that he "hates

school" and doesn't care about his school work.

It is also a major battle to get Jimmy to take responsibility for his chores. Jimmy often simply refuses, stating that he is being "picked on."

In talking with Jimmy, his brother and parents, the Adlerian counselor tries to build a cooperative relationship of mutual trust and respect. The counselor systematically explores current life situations, as well as Jimmy's formative years. Again, the major purpose of the interview is to understand the child's unique personality or life style.

In the example of Jimmy, several things became apparent to the Adlerian counselor. Mr. and Mrs. Spencer greatly value academic achievement. Dave, being two years older than Jimmy, had a head start in receiving recognition through school work and cooperation. To Jimmy, he seemed to be so far ahead. Where did that leave Jimmy? He could never be as "smart" or as "good" as Dave. How could Jimmy find his place in the family? Well, if Dave is good, Jimmy must be bad. That's it! Jimmy can get attention and recognition by being bad! He can feel important by

provoking Dave, Mother, Dad, the teacher - anybody into a fight! "They can't make me do anything! That's my power! That's my place in the family!"

Obviously Jimmy doesn't consciously think any of this. But considerations such as these build Jimmy's life style. Uncovering these facts, the counselor is in an excellent position to make various suggestions to the parents.

What suggestions did the Adlerian counselor make to Mr. and Mrs. Spencer? First, it was explained that Jimmy feelsinferior to Dave in academics and cooperation around the home. This results in a great deal of anxiety for Jimmy. For this reason comparisons and competition between the two should be minimized. It was suggested that Mrs. Spencer stop the practice of rewarding the children with money for earning "A's" in school. This practice merely reinforces Jimmy's inferior self-concept as his brother's success is emphasized. Also, it should be remembered that the underlying purpose of studying is to learn, not to receive monetary rewards. Each child should be encouraged separately as he makes his own personal progress in school. In this way, Jimmy's

feelings of accomplishment and self-worth will be heightened, which will aid him in developing to his full potential.

In Mrs. Spencer's prodding Jimmy to study, a power struggle often results which Jimmy wins by refusing to study. If the responsibility is left to him, this power struggle will be eliminated and Jimmy will realize that he can and must stand on his own feet academically. In order to allow Jimmy to take responsibility for his academic performance, he should be told that it is up to him to get his work done, since this is ultimately the case anyway. The natural consequences of not doing his homework will also be much more effective if it is fully Jimmy's responsibility to do his homework. It is extremely important for Mr. and Mrs. Spencer to encourage Jimmy when he is studying or making any academic improvement. When he is not studying, however, an unconcerned atmosphere should prevail on the parents' part, since it is Jimmy's responsibility and not his parents'.

When fights break out between Jimmy and Dave, their parents should be told not to break them up or attempt to decide who started them, but instead to remain unconcerned. Many fights

between children are initaited simply to gain attention or draw their parents into the argument. The parents could respond to the fight by simply saying to the children, "I'm sorry you feel that you have to fight, but I'm sure you can resolve your problems between yourselves." In this way they may well take the main purpose of fighting away from the children. In not entering into the children's fights, Mr. and Mrs. Spencer can help promote Jimmy's and Dave's independence and responsibility. In addition, they will not be forced to take sides with one child against another.

Democracy is a cornerstone of the Adlerian approach. To promote more democratic, less authoritative, interactions around the Spencer house, the "Family Council" may be useful. The Family Council is a meeting of all members of the family in which problems are discussed and solutions are sought. A definite hour on a definite day of each week should be set aside for this purpose; it should become part of the family routine. Every member is expected to be present. Should one member not wish to come, he must still abide by the decisions of the group. Each member has the right to bring up a problem and to be heard.

Together, all seek a solution to the problem, and the majority opinion is upheld. In the Family Council, the parents' votes are no higher or stronger than that of each child. The decision at a given meeting holds for a week.

If the Family Council is implemented, communication and cooperation will be increased within the family. Since the delegation of chores and other responsibilities become a family decision, a power conflict will not develop between parents and children.

Through specific, workable suggestions such as these, the Adlerian counselor helps the parents redirect or reorient their children to more adaptive, happier ways of life. In addition, the Adlerian counselor attempts to pass on to the parents the basically democratic philosophy behind Adlerian principles so that they will have some framework from which to solve future family problems.

I have just scratched the surface of Adlerian counseling here. Its potential for helping families is unlimited. Ultimately, the implementation of Adlerian counseling for parent education is up to us. If we are to beneficially affect children's home

environments on a large scale, we must share useful counseling skills with parents themselves. The methods are ready and the hour is late.